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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000365

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STATE FOR EAP/MTS

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TAGS: [PINS](#) [KISL](#) [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [RP](#)  
SUBJECT: NEW PEACE PROCESS ADVISER OPTIMISTIC ABOUT FUTURE  
TALKS WITH REBELS

REF: MANILA 0153 (PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT EYES PEACE  
TALKS BUT SOME HURDLES REMAIN)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a February 10 meeting with the Ambassador, newly installed Peace Process Adviser Avelino Razon, Jr., expressed optimism that talks with Muslim rebels in the southern Philippines would advance this year and described the government's recent discussions with the Malaysian facilitators on how to move talks forward. Demonstrating the government's ongoing commitment to peace, he noted that President Arroyo remained engaged on consultations with communities and peace process stakeholders throughout Mindanao, while Razon held meetings with international "peace experts" to learn from their experiences in conflict resolution. In an official January visit to Kuala Lumpur, Razon said, Philippine government chief negotiator Rafael Seguis suggested to Malaysian officials that they replace their top facilitator with someone new, citing the benefits of fresh perspective on the peace process -- an idea that elicited no response from the Malaysians. Still displeased with Kuala Lumpur's performance (reftel), Razon explained that the Philippines continued to solicit Organization of the Islamic Conference countries to play roles as facilitators. Ambassador related to Razon an earlier conversation in which she urged the government to take concrete action to revive the stalled talks and bluntly urged a rebel peace panel member to be more flexible in the return to talks. Turning to other conflicts in the Philippines, Razon expressed satisfaction that peace talks with Communist rebels and another Muslim group were also making progress. END SUMMARY.

RAZON OPTIMISTIC ABOUT 2009  
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12. (C) In a February 10 meeting with the Ambassador, newly installed Peace Process Adviser Avelino Razon, Jr., expressed optimism that 2009 would be the "year of progress" for peace talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Stressing the government's ongoing commitment to peace, he noted that President Arroyo remained engaged on consultations with communities and peace process stakeholders throughout Mindanao, having visited the towns of Koronadal, South Cotabato, and Kidapawan, North Cotabato. Over the past months, Razon said he had learned much from "peace experts" on the Northern Ireland and Sudan conflicts about the importance of not giving up and taking creative approaches to peace. The Ambassador encouraged him to listen to good advice and, more importantly, to translate that advice into action. While Razon admitted that he did not yet personally know any members of the MILF, he said he was familiar with peace process and Muslim issues from his days in law enforcement and at the helm of the Philippine National Police, from which he retired in 2008. Razon expressed the

Philippine government's gratitude to the Ambassador for U.S. development assistance in Mindanao, and the Ambassador offered to visit him again to brief him and his team on U.S. programs.

TRYING TO ENGAGE MALAYSIA, BUT LOOKING ELSEWHERE  
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13. (C) Razon outlined the discussions between the Philippine government's top peace panel negotiator Undersecretary Rafael Seguis and Malaysian officials during Seguis' January visit to Kuala Lumpur. Seguis suggested to Malaysian officials that they replace their primary facilitator, Othman Abdul Razak, with someone new, citing the benefits of bringing fresh perspective to the peace process. Since the Philippines had replaced its peace panel with new faces, it would be appropriate for Malaysia to revamp its own roster of facilitators. The idea elicited no response from the Malaysians, Razon said. Still displeased with Kuala Lumpur's performance (reftel) in recent years as peace process facilitator, Razon explained that the Philippines was continuing to solicit Organization of the Islamic Conference countries to also become facilitators. Ambassador pointed out that it could be complicated to have multiple facilitators and that, if there were, the Philippines would need strong back channel communications to keep peace talks from becoming bogged down.

AMBASSADOR URGES MILF TO SHOW FLEXIBILITY  
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14. (C) The Ambassador related to Razon a conversation she had

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earlier that day with an MILF member at a U.S.-sponsored event on the role of journalists in the peace process, at which the Ambassador delivered remarks. MILF peace panel senior member Attorney Michael Mastura, a guest speaker at the event, approached the Ambassador to thank her for U.S. support for development work in Mindanao and invited the Ambassador to visit MILF headquarters at Camp Darapanan. Ambassador responded that she did not see the utility in a visit while talks were stalled and fighting continued. Mastura noted that the MILF was trying to get back to peace talks, but the Ambassador said the MILF needed to try harder. Reiterating a point that Mastura himself made in his speech, the Ambassador observed that, with Filipinos still fighting each other in Mindanao, the MILF needed to show courage and push to get back to talks. "If that means showing flexibility," the Ambassador pointed out to Mastura, "then do it." Accepting the Ambassador's suggestion, Mastura agreed, said that fighting had gone on for too long, and noted that the MILF wanted talks to resume so Mindanao's Muslims could have opportunities to improve their lives. The Ambassador said that the U.S. wanted to help them achieve that in the context of peace talks.

MINOR PROGRESS IN OTHER PEACE TALKS  
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15. (C) Turning to the peace process with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), Razon said that his office was reviewing the path for implementing the second phase of the 1996 final peace agreement, and toward that end they were considering revisions to the law that created the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. Razon declined to identify the government's negotiating counterpart at the MNLF, acknowledging it was a "complicated" matter. Talks with the Communist Party / New People's Army (NPA) / National Democratic Front had entered the third round of informals, Razon said, and the communists had narrowed their list of demands from 13 to four, an indication of modest progress.

COMMENT  
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¶6. (C) Razon's optimism is welcomed by peace process observers, but there remains a clear need for concrete action on the part of the government to get back to the negotiating table. The MILF, for its part, has not modified its preconditions for talks (revisiting the abandoned territory agreement and calling for an immediate ceasefire, among other demands) and maintains an inflexible stance, as the Ambassador noted in her comments to the MILF peace panel member. While the parties are engaged in some back channel communications, they have not yet agreed on a framework for talks, and this remains a key obstacle to the resumption of peace negotiations.

KENNEY